



CUNY Academic Commons Annual Report 2019-2020

Letter from the Director

More than ten years into its existence, the CUNY Academic Commons has become more important than ever as an open educational platform that serves the entire 25 campus community. Between Jan 1, 2020 and Jan 20, 2021, and in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commons hosted 665 courses across the CUNY campuses; during that time, 7384 new members joined the Commons—6563 of them students, and 538 of them faculty—for a total of over 28,000 members. Campuses across the system have been making abundant use of the Commons -- City College has taught 345 courses on the Commons over the past year; Brooklyn College has taught 103, and BMCC has taught 102. Such numbers continue across the system, at senior, community, and graduate colleges. It is clear that at a moment when all instruction has been forced online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the CUNY Academic Commons has served as a crucial pedagogical, research, and social infrastructure for the entire CUNY system.

That the Commons was there to support faculty and students in this work was no accident.

[Community-owned infrastructure](#) has become a popular concept in higher-ed discussions around scholarly communication, pointing as it does to the need for scholarly communities to manage and control the platforms on which they meet. The CUNY Academic Commons, in many ways, was there first: from our own CUNY Academic Commons to the larger [Commons In A Box](#) project—which has been used to power enormous projects such as the [Humanities Commons](#)—CUNY has led the way in the development of open-source, community-based infrastructure that is responsive to the population it serves.

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Even more impressive than the sheer number of courses that have been taught on the Commons over the past year is the way in which individual CUNY campuses have been using the Commons to scale up exciting and imaginative pedagogical activities. City College is using the Commons for its first-year writing program, leading to over 2700 student portfolios on the

Commons created since Spring 2019. The CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, meanwhile, is launching its own student portfolio initiative.

Meanwhile, students are using the Commons to create thesis and capstone research projects, such as [Beyond the Vale: Visualizing Slavery in Craven County](#) on the Commons; faculty are publishing impressive research projects such as the [New York Slavery Records Index](#); academic journals are using the Commons to create peer-reviewed publications such as [The Journal of Technology and Pedagogy](#); and teaching and learning centers at a number of campuses, including [Hunter College](#), [Borough of Manhattan Community College](#), and [The Graduate Center](#) use the Commons to host their websites. More than a dozen academic programs use the Commons to stay in touch with their students. Alumni continue to use the Commons to stay in touch with the university. The breadth of use across the CUNY campuses is stunning.

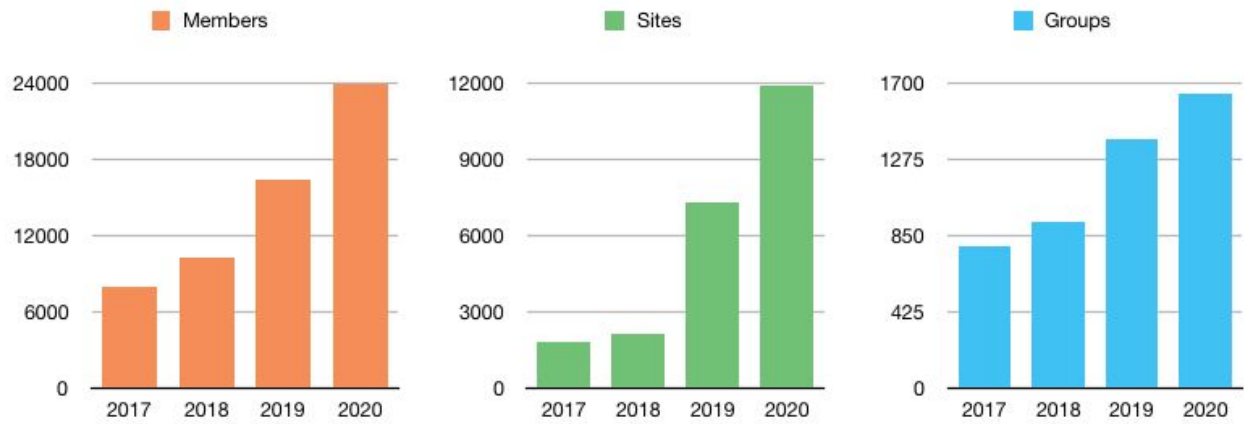
All of this work is supported on open-source infrastructure at a fraction of the cost of proprietary platforms, staffed entirely by a team of part-time community facilitators, developers, and faculty and staff volunteers. The Commons, as I have long argued, *is* CUNY. It is built from the ground up, with input from the community. It provides an open space to all members of the community, and gives them freedom to create and experiment. It gives back to larger open-source communities. And it is centrally supported by the Office of Academic Affairs and Office of Library Services, and hosted by the CUNY Graduate Center in its role as a consortial hub of the university system.

Animating the Commons throughout its time has been our motto: "what will you create?" Resoundingly, the CUNY community has answered that call over the past year with an extraordinary outpouring of creative and intellectual energy. We look forward to the year ahead and to the continuing role that the Commons will play in a year marked not only by a pandemic, but also by the resilience that the community has shown in the face of it.

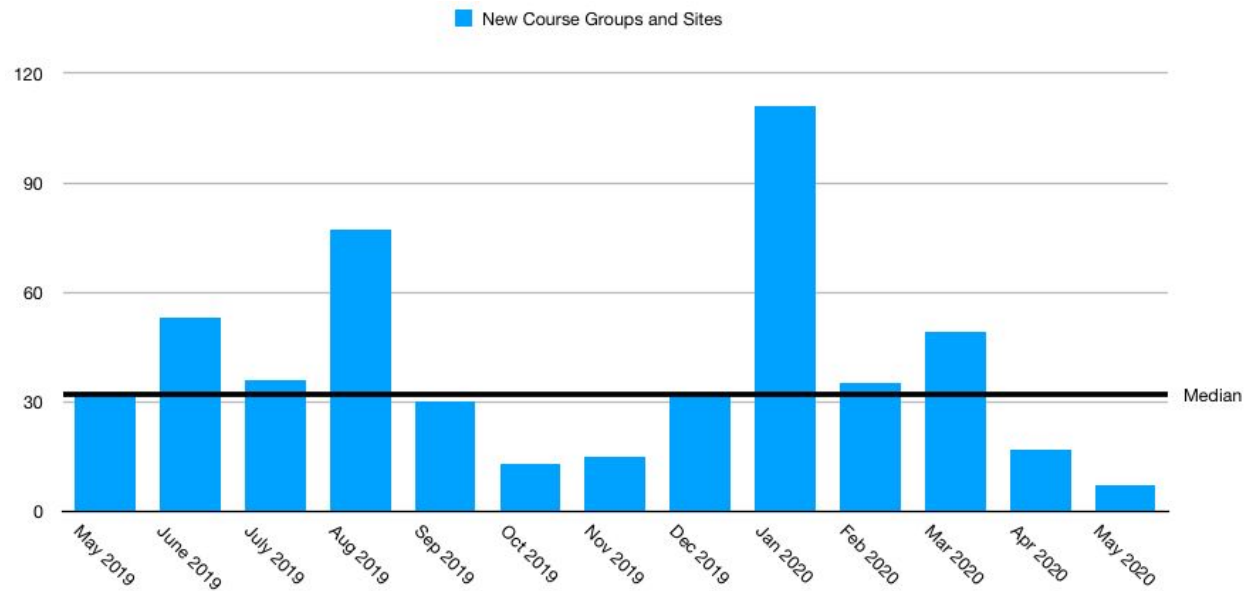
For more about the Commons, please continue reading, but also check out [these charts](#) highlighting the growth of the Commons over the past ten years and this [Thought Project podcast interview](#).

Matthew K. Gold, Ph.D.
Director, CUNY Academic Commons
Associate Professor of English and Digital Humanities, The Graduate Center, CUNY

The Commons by the Numbers



The Commons has built on the dramatic growth of 2018-2019 with a strong increase in teaching activity, fueled in part by COVID-19 adaptations. After membership more than doubled and sites more than tripled from June 2017 to June 2019 (chart totals are for June 1st of each year), those numbers increased again in 2019-2020 by 45% and 60%, respectively.



More than 500 groups and sites were created for courses during the academic year, roughly four times the Commons total at this time last year, when we were only months removed from openly launching undergraduate teaching. As the chart above shows, there were spikes in teaching development during August 2019 and January 2020 as new semesters began, with an uptick as well in March 2020 as COVID-19 struck and courses moved to an online-only model.

Continuing last year's trend, the three most visited sites on the Commons were the CUNY Graduate Center's [Political Science website](#), the [Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy](#), and the [New Labor Forum](#), indicating the range of disciplinary work on the Commons.

The Commons as Classroom

Teaching on the Commons has exploded in the past two years, a trend that was underway prior to the disruptions of March 2020 but which accelerated as all instruction across the university moved online in a matter of days. Since January 2019, more than one thousand course sites have been hosted on the CUNY Academic Commons, with more than six hundred running during 2020. Teaching was heaviest on the Commons during the Fall 2020 semester, when 361 courses hosted their sites. Each campus in the CUNY system has hosted more than 15 course sites on the Commons, with City College, the Graduate Center, and Brooklyn College hosting the most.

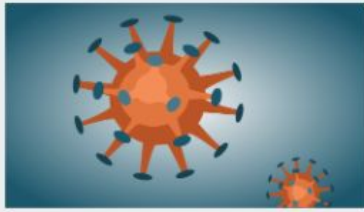
Since January 2019, more than one thousand course sites have been hosted on the CUNY Academic Commons. . . Each campus in the CUNY system has hosted more than 15 course sites on the Commons

In 2020-2021, two exciting portfolio initiatives were launched on the Commons at City College (tied to the first-year writing program) and the School of Labor and Urban Studies, which have brought nearly three thousand undergraduates onto the system.

The Commons and COVID

During the second week of March, as the World Health Organization declared a pandemic and the U.S. declared a national emergency, the most visited site on the Commons (even more than the homepage) was [Considerations for Instructional Continuity](#), a site nimbly created by the Teaching & Learning Center at the Graduate Center to address concerns about campuses closing, online teaching resources, and much more.

The site received 6,000 pageviews, or about 5% of all pageviews across the Commons from March 8th to 15th, as our members and many others began in earnest to address the COVID-19 threat to their work. It was the beginning of a very strange and very busy second half of the semester, one which saw the aforementioned swell in new course activity matched by efforts to assist and inform those impacted by the outbreak.



CUNY Academic Commons COVID-19 Response and Resources

The CUNY Academic Commons is open and available to serve the CUNY community as it responds to the Coronavirus pandemic.

[Learn more](#)

Fortunately, our teaching and support team had already begun an overhaul of resources and tutorials on our [help site](#), such as this Teaching and Learning [overview](#). They began collaborating with management, development, design and social media staff to release a series of COVID-19 updates during the rest of March to help members new and old navigate the rapidly changing world. This included the above banner and accompanying [news post](#), and a [resource collection](#) on our In Common blog. Our support team also became even more vigilant and responsive to students and teachers asking for help on a range of issues initiated by the crisis.

In a testament to the energy and versatility of the Commons, members have launched a range of other COVID-19 projects since then. Highlights include:

- The CUNY School of Professional Studies created a [Course Design and Development Tutorial](#)
- The [CUNY Distance Learning Archive](#) began documenting the transition to online instruction during the pandemic through a variety of media, resources and reflections.
- A [comprehensive digital workshop](#) for online course design from the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at City College.
- On March 30, 2020 the Commons team hosted a Webinar for Teaching on the Commons to help teachers transition to new remote and online learning models. We worked with webinar attendees as well as those who could not attend but set up appointments through GC Online.
- As part of the Teaching and Learning Center's [Teach@CUNY Summer Institute](#), the Commons team launched three June asynchronous [workshops](#) to introduce the platform and Open Digital Pedagogy. The Commons team ran a similar series of August [workshops](#) as part of GC Online.

As the crisis evolves, so will the Commons. The coming months hold even more initiatives to prepare for new teaching scenarios, from both our staff and our community.

The Commons Looks Ahead

As we release this report in January 2021, roughly six months later than usual due to the disruption of the pandemic, our continued growth highlights the importance of the Commons to so many who are adapting to the world of remote teaching and learning. We have added 4,600 members since June (a 19% increase), almost all of them students and faculty (or both). This brings our total member count to 28,600.

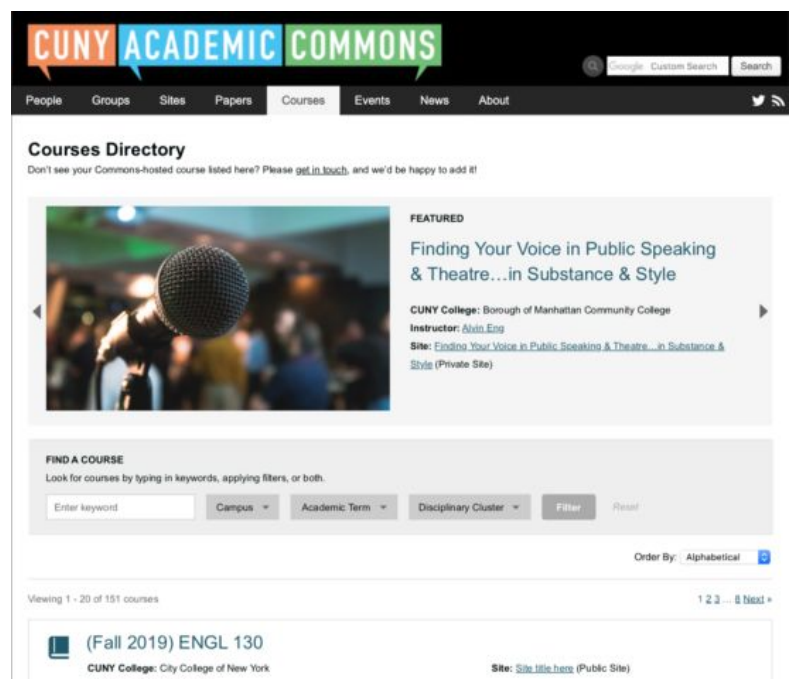
We've added 3,000 Sites and 212 Groups over the same period, a 25% and 12% increase since June. Of these, a substantial number were explicitly set up for coursework, bringing our total course-related Sites and Groups on the Commons to more than one thousand. We've come a long way since launching undergraduate teaching less than two years ago, when we had no idea how crucial it would become.

We continue to see growth in our overall traffic as well, according to Google Analytics. We recorded 570,000 pageviews in May 2020 for our busiest month ever, but the Fall 2020 semester and its widespread online teaching saw us even busier - over 600,000 pageviews in September as the semester ramped up, and over 700,000 in December as it came to a close. Our total number of unique visitors from June 2019 to June 2020 also crested one million for the first time. We've had roughly 640,000 visitors in the first six months of this new academic year.

There are no signs that this significant growth will slow down any time soon, and these quantitative results are just a topline measurement of the deep impact our platform has on the CUNY community every day.

The Commons in Development

After spending the 2018-2019 development cycles on tools for easily setting up new spaces on the Commons, including a new [creation portal](#) as well as [templates and plugin packages](#), we focused this year on increasing the reach and functionality of existing groups and sites.



The screenshot shows the CUNY Academic Commons website interface. At the top, the logo "CUNY ACADEMIC COMMONS" is displayed in a colorful, stylized font. Below the logo is a navigation menu with links for "People", "Groups", "Sites", "Papers", "Courses", "Events", "News", and "About". A search bar is located in the top right corner. The main content area is titled "Courses Directory" and includes a sub-header: "Don't see your Commons-hosted course listed here? Please [get in touch](#), and we'd be happy to add it!". Below this is a featured course card for "Finding Your Voice in Public Speaking & Theatre...in Substance & Style" by CUNY College: Borough of Manhattan Community College, with instructor [Abin Epp](#). The card includes a photo of a microphone and a "Read" button. Below the featured card is a "FIND A COURSE" section with a search bar and filters for "Campus", "Academic Term", and "Disciplinary Cluster". The page indicates "Viewing 1 - 20 of 151 courses" and "Order By: Alphabetical". The bottom of the page shows a course listing for "(Fall 2019) ENGL 130" by CUNY College: City College of New York, with a "Site: [Site title here](#) (Public Site)" link.

Release 1.16: Highlighting and Filtering Courses

The Fall 2019 [release](#) revamped our [Courses Directory](#) to enable better search and discovery of the rapidly-expanding Commons teaching activity. The page features a slideshow of notable teaching examples, a search and filter interface powered by course metadata we began collecting last year, and general design enhancements like icons representing disciplinary clusters.

Release 1.17: Group Library Overhaul, Site Cloning Launch

Our development schedule was not immune to the disruption of COVID-19, and we were forced to postpone our Spring 2020 release (usually completed in May, after the end of the semester) due to urgent and shifting priorities. The team has shown great resilience in forging ahead, however, and we are now on track to release in July, after the summer session. An all-new site cloning flow and a revamped group media library anchor this release.

Site cloning builds in part on the creation portal launched last year. It allows a site administrator to make a standalone copy of one of their sites, pulling over settings (like theme, nav menus, and widgets) and selected content (posts and pages created by admins of the source site). This could be particularly useful for teachers who want separate instances of a site with some of the same content and structure for different semesters, for example.

The new Group Library feature consolidates the existing group repositories for Docs, Files, and Papers. It also provides new interfaces for the creation of Docs and Files as well as a new item type, External Links, that makes it easier to reference cloud-based documents or any other link relevant to the group.

Both of these features will allow Commons members to build upon and better utilize the content they've already created in their Groups and Sites.

Create a Site

Create New or Clone Existing?

You can either start fresh with your Site or clone an existing Site (if you are an admin of it) to use as the basis for another site.

Create a New Site

Clone an Existing Site

CAC Team Group Blog ▾

Note: As an admin of a Site, you can choose this option to clone it as the basis for a new one.

By filling out the form below, you can add a site to your account. There is no limit to the number of sites you can have, so create to your heart's content — but please blog responsibly!

Site Details

Site Domain:

Note: The domain cannot be changed once created

.commons.gc.cuny.edu/

Title	Added by	Date
this is a new BP Doc	Scott Voith	6/22/2020
testing.doc	collinmed	6/17/2020
upload via safari	Scott Voith	6/10/2020
2014 Budget Request Stats Report	Christopher Stein	6/10/2020
new link via Opera	Scott Voith	6/10/2020
Commons HTML Email 3/21 Chris (should I be able to edit this???)	Christopher Stein	6/10/2020
proftech	Test Student	6/9/2020

The Commons in the World

Since its founding, a central part of the mission of the CUNY Academic Commons has been to impact the methods and technology for teaching and scholarship beyond the boundaries of both CUNY and the Commons website itself. Our work this year showcases our ongoing commitment to this broader impact in a number of important ways.

Our usual June publication of this report would have landed at the height of the summer 2020 Black Lives Matter protest movement, which our team watched with a commitment to anti-racism and using the community platform of the Commons to promote equality and connection. We spent the summer planning a thorough response to the crisis of systematic racism, which we [announced](#) in August as the fall semester began. Our new efforts include reviewing hiring practices, opening up the CUNY Academic Commons Subcommittee to new members, creating the new group [Anti-Racism at CUNY](#), and creating a series of programs to highlight anti-racist work.

The CUNY Academic Commons team continues to support the Commons In A Box project. Last year's release of CBOX OpenLab, funded by grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities' Office of Digital Humanities, has brought a new set of users to CBOX. The Commons team has worked to support these new users through continuing updates to CBOX and the WordPress plugins that are part of the package. Our collaboration with City Tech and BMCC - campuses where platforms powered by CBOX OpenLab have flourished, particularly with the shift to remote learning - continue to showcase the potential for collaboration across CUNY campuses, and the pivotal role of the CUNY Academic Commons in facilitating it.

The Commons Team

Director: Matthew K. Gold

Lead Developer: Boone B. Gorges

Director of Community Projects: Luke Waltzer

Director of Research Initiatives: Lisa Rhody

Director of User Experience: Chris Stein

Director of Special Projects: Michael Smith

Open Educational Technologists: Laurie Hurson, Robin Miller

Project Manager: Colin McDonald

Developer: Raymond Hoh

Developer: Jeremy Felt

User Experience Specialist: Sonja Leix

Community Facilitators: Scott Voth, Anthony Wheeler, Marilyn Weber

Hosting and Systems Administration: Office of Information Technology, Graduate Center, CUNY

The CUNY Academic Commons is a project of the CUNY Committee on Academic Technology, which contains two representatives from each CUNY Campus and which is chaired by Jonathan Gagliardi, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Academic Effectiveness and Innovation at The City University of New York.

The CUNY Academic Commons has been generously funded since 2009 by The CUNY Office of Academic Affairs, the CUNY Office of Library Services, and the State of New York.